Rules for Using Commas

1. Use a comma **after a transition word or phrase:**

   One day, my mother called me with good news. However, I wasn't home when she called.

2. Use a comma **before the eight coordinating conjunctions** and, or, so, but, nor, yet, for, although if they **connect two complete sentences** with subject and verb:

   He came early, but she came late.
   She bought a computer, although she didn't know how to use it.
   He was hungry, yet he didn't eat anything.
   I was hungry, and I wanted to eat right away.
   She was mad at me, so she refused to discuss it.
   He washed the windows, or he swept the floor.
   I didn't want to sing, nor did I want to dance.
   I was ready to leave, for there was nothing to do there.

   Don't use a comma before coordinating conjunctions if they **don't connect two complete sentences** with subject and verb:

   He came early and left late.
   I was hungry and wanted to eat.
   He washed the windows or swept the floor.

3. Use a comma **after a subordinate clause that comes before a main clause:**

   A subordinate clause **has a subject and verb** but is not a complete sentence. It adds information to another clause, the main clause. It often tells when or why or under what circumstances:

   When I'm hungry, I go to McDonald's.
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(when I'm hungry tells when I go to McDonald's)

Because she's Albanian, she wants freedom from Serbia.
(because she's Albanian tells why she wants independence)

If it rains, we'll see a movie.
(if it rains tells under what circumstances we'll see a movie)

Even though I had a test the following day, I went to a movie.
(even though I had a test... tells under what circumstances I went)
A subordinate clause can go BEFORE or AFTER a main clause.
Don't use a comma if the clause comes after the main clause:

She wants freedom from Serbia because she's Albanian.
I go to McDonald's when I'm hungry.
We'll see a movie if it rains.
I went to a movie even though I had a test the following day.

4. Use a comma around extra information words that don’t include a verb ("inserts") that could be removed from a sentence without changing or losing its basic meaning:

added description
New Hampshire, a state with many tall mountains, is my home.

extra identification
My father, a good doctor, took care of all my cousins.

added name
My son, Rick, is home from college but not my son, Tom.

added specification
Fruit, especially apples and pears, can help your digestion.
We played a lot of sports, like soccer and volleyball.
She did a lot of office jobs, **such as typing and filing.** Many people, **including actors and politicians,** have no privacy.

**NOTE:** *For example* is a transition phrase, and it should be used to start a new sentence, not for an insert like those above:

We played a lot of sports. *For example,* we played volleyball every afternoon and soccer every Saturday.

**added opinion**
The teacher, **not a friendly man,** gave us homework every night.

Sometimes **transition words** and phrases (#2, above) **can be used as inserts:**

Her daughter likes meat. Her son, **however,** won't eat it.

She was cleaning the patio. Her brother, **in the meantime,** was in the basement making a chair.

The company lost money. His salary, **therefore,** was not going to go up any time soon.
5. Use commas around extra information words that include a verb ("relative clauses") that could be removed from a sentence without changing or losing its basic meaning:

Professor Smith, who teaches the evening class, is on a leave of absence. Central Park, which was built by Olmsted, is one of the world’s most venerated parks.

The above relative clauses are nonrestrictive because they are not needed to identify (restrict) which professor or which park you are talking about. They simply add extra information. The following are restrictive relative clauses because they are needed to identify which kind of thing or person you are talking about. There are no commas in these cases:

We want to hire a professor who will listen to the students. I'd like to visit a park that has a zoo and a picnic area.

Notice the difference below between A and B:

A: I have two aunts. My aunt who lives in New Jersey is old. B: I have one aunt. My aunt, who lives in New Jersey, is old.

In A, the information about New Jersey is NECESSARY to identify which one of two different aunts. We call this a restrictive relative clause because it restricts (identifies) who I am talking about.

In B, the information is EXTRA because there is only one aunt, and it isn't necessary to identify the home state to identify who I'm talking about. There is only one aunt.

6. Use a comma to between two elements that come together with no word separating them:
Use a comma between city, state (or country)
I come from **Kokomo, Indiana**. He's from **Cali, Colombia**.

Use a comma between date (or month), year
I came to the US in **May, 1989**. He was born on **June 10, 1934**.

7. Use a comma to **between items in a list**.
You may put a comma before **and** at the end of the list. [It’s not required, but many publishers do it when they feel it is useful for clarity.]

I like **bananas, pears, apples[,]** and **peaches**.

Lists must always have a final **and**, even if the list has only two items:
BAD: *I love fruit, like apples, peaches.
GOOD: I love fruit, like apples **and** peaches.
Exercise: Tell which rule (1-7) is responsible for the comma:

___ 1. I have a generous aunt, who sends me money regularly.
___ 2. My uncle, a jolly fellow, gives good advice.
___ 3. Fortunately, my car was insured.
___ 4. He gave a sigh of relief, and he picked up the package.
___ 5. He comes from Paris, France.
___ 7. When you get to New York, you should visit me.
___ 8. San Francisco, the most beautiful city in the US, is where my brother lives.
___ 9. We entered the war on December 7, 1941.
___ 10. We took him to court, which turned out to be the worst decision we had ever made.
___ 11. Because you are only 18, you can't buy a drink with us.
___ 12. Once in a while, I have a beer with dinner.
___ 13. The camp offers swimming, camping, water skiing and tennis.
___ 14. He called her every morning, but she never came to the phone.

(Now put in all necessary commas and in each case put TWO rules that inspired your decision.)
15. One day I told her that she was losing her mind but she paid no attention to me.

16. If you see her tell her that I need paper clips pens pencils and White Out.

17. My neighbor an annoying old man always complains when I play loud music after 9 PM but I don't pay any attention to him.

18. She comes from Belgrade Yugoslavia so she speaks Serbo-Croatian.

19. Before she has lunch she usually cleans the kitchen and yesterday was no exception.

20. My teacher who always has a smile on her face started working here in May 1998.